

## ***Responsibility and Ethical Reasoning in the Nigerian Press***

by Cornelius B. Pratt\*

### ***Abstract***

This analysis of the responsibility and ethics of six Nigerian daily newspapers addresses two major questions. First, what is the dominant ethical philosophy of the Nigerian press as indicated in its editorials? Second, what is the ethical responsibility of the press as indicated in its editorials? It examines the 'role-responsibility' of the press within the context of three dominant ethical themes: deontological, situational, and utilitarian ethics.

A qualitative thematic analysis of the editorials indicates that the Nigerian daily press has a preference for applying utilitarian ethics to national issues. Situational ethics has the least presence in the editorials. The analysis also indicates that the government-owned newspapers are more likely than the privately-owned newspapers to use a utilitarian ethical perspective in expressing their opinions on, and in criticizing, government actions. This analysis concludes that by beginning to understand the different manifestations of government-press relationships and of media role in contributing to the nation's 'common good,' journalists can better plan for the difficult process of more effectively involving the press in national development.

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## *Responsabilité et Raisonnement éthique dan la presse Nigérienne.*

### *Resume*

Cette analyse de la responsabilité et de l'éthique de 6 quotidiens Nigériens traite de deux questions. La première: quelle est la philosophie éthique dominante de la presse nigérienne tel qu'il ressort des éditoriaux. La deuxième: quelle est la responsabilité éthique de la presse tel qu'il ressort des éditoriaux? L'auteur étudie le "role responsabilité" de la presse dans le contexte de trois thèmes éthiques dominants: déontologie, situation et éthique utilitaire.

Une analyse thématique qualitative des éditoriaux indique que la presse quotidienne Nigérienne a une préférence à appliquer l'éthique utilitaire aux problèmes nationaux. L'éthique situationnelle est celui qui apparait le moins dans les éditoriaux. L'analyse fait également ressortir que les journaux du gouvernement, plus que les journaux privés ont tendance à utiliser une perspective éthique utilitaire pour exprimer leurs opinions sur ou pour critiquer les actions du gouvernement. Elle conclut que, si les journalistes commençaient à comprendre les différentes manifestations des relations gouvernements — presse et le rôle des médias à contribuer au "bien" de la nation, ils seraient à même de mieux planifier le processus difficile de faire participer la presse plus efficacement au développement national.



## Introduction

The phenomenal growth that occurred from the early 1970s through the mid-1980s in the Nigerian newspaper industry has been stymied by the high cost of newsprint, the uncertainty of its supply, and by the reduction in the purchasing power of the consumer in an economy that is virtually stagnant. Nonetheless, the role of Nigerian mass media in national development is increasing, partly because of the country's growing continent-wide political strengths and because the mass media have fewer restrictions than those commonly observed in other sub-Saharan African nations. *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1986*, published by the U.S. Department of State, notes, for example, that the Nigerian society is generally free of arbitrary interference by the state in the private lives of its citizens, that there is no evidence of overt government censorship of the media, that Nigeria has a lively press, and that there are no restrictions on ownership of the print media. Even the occasional conflicts and confrontations between the press and the government have not deprived the press of its 'critical, independent tendencies' (Hunt and Seng 1988).

Ever since the rise and fall of Nigeria's First Republic, the ethical conduct of the country's public officials has been a frequent subject for media attention and analyses. In the light of the malfeasance that has permeated public life, and of the continuing power politics between the military and civilian interest groups, the national responsibilities undertaken by the Nigerian press have become increasingly significant. The press is a participant in the patron-client structure, that is, in the strong, asymmetrical and complementary relationships between interest groups and the press. Yet a literature search revealed almost no scholarly articles on the ethical component of its role in nation-building. One article (Nwosu 1987) observed that even though Nigerian journalists profess to abide by codes of journalistic conduct drawn up by the International Federation of Journalists, the International Press Institute, and by the Nigerian Press Organizations, adherence to such codes has, in reality, been miniscule.

The exploratory research summarized here is the first segment of a long-range project on the ethics of the Nigerian daily press. As Meiden (1980: 8) observes, 'Ethics should saturate the whole process of communication and not be regarded as [a] minor aspect of communication.'

In the developing nations, the developmental concept of the press implies, among other things, that information is the property of the state and that civil rights are somewhat irrelevant in the face of poverty, illiteracy and ethnicity (Hachten 1987). The implication of this developmental concept for the ethics of the press is clear: its code of ethics is reflective of the narrow standards of interest groups rather than of the

broad standards of the professional practice of journalism. Merrill (1981: 178) appropriately describes such a phenomenon in the U.S. press as an 'ethics vacuum.' In general, this suggests that there is much to be desired in the ethics of the U.S. press. Yet, as Merrill (1975: 8) notes:

A concern for ethics is important. The journalist who has this concern obviously cares about good or right actions; such a concern indicates an attitude which embraces both freedom and personal responsibility. It indicates also that the journalist desires to discover norms for action that will serve him as guiding principles or specific directives in achieving the kind of life which he thinks most meaningful and satisfying. Ethical concern is important also for it forces the journalist to commitment, to thoughtful decision among alternatives. It leads him to seek the *summum bonum*, the highest good in journalism, thereby heightening his authenticity as a person and journalist.

Even though the press influences the 'people's conscience' (Anamaleze 1979), ethics as a theoretical concept does not attract scholarly attention among Nigerians (Amadi 1982). At a time when the Nigerian media are seeking ways to minimize government control measures and to develop effective discipline-enforcement mechanisms (Nwosu 1987), this present analysis could add a dimension to that search. Thus the purpose of this paper is twofold: first, it attempts to identify the dominant patterns of the ethics of the Nigerian press as indicated in its editorials on national issues; second, it analyses, within the ethics context, the responsibility of the press as indicated in its editorials. To address these two issues, it is necessary to approach them in what might be considered a reverse order. That is, I shall first describe, based on a qualitative analysis, the ethics of the press that serves as the framework within which the press's responsibility will be analysed.

### ***Conceptualizing the Responsibility of the Press***

This paper describes and evaluates the responsibility of the Nigerian press within the theoretical framework of its ethics. This approach is justified by the fact that the functions and roles of the press are — to a large extent — reflections of the ethics of the press. Because the press does not exist in a vacuum but is an actor in a community of different agenda (Pratt and Manheim 1988), organizations cannot completely deprive a person of the capability to anticipate the effects of his or her actions on others (Niebuhr 1932). This translates into two major points: that the journalist is individually responsible for his or her actions, and that the media organization is also responsible to a broad range of publics and their interests.



The word "responsibility" has a welter of diverse meanings and applications; however, it has four unifying features (Niebuhr 1963; Hart 1968; Childress 1982). The first is answerability, by which a person (e.g., a journalist) responds to public queries that result from his or her actions, and second, interaction between a person and his or her publics. The press, for example, is an actor in a community of at least four different agenda: small group or interpersonal agenda, urban elite, urban non-elite, and public policy (Pratt and Manheim 1988). Third, justification of an action when it appears to violate some moral principles or rules. Finally, the duty or obligation to respond to questions about conduct and to advocate the public interest. Because the press is a social organization that undertakes specific roles in media systems, the 'role-responsibility' (Hart 1968) interpretation of the concept is used in this paper. This means that the press is an institution that is responsible to society for a variety of functions '...to which specific duties are attached to provide for the welfare of others or to advance in some specific way the aims or purposes of the organization...' (Hart 1968: 212).

To be sure, the press's fulfillment of these role-responsibilities is dependent on a variety of internal and external contingencies (Wiio 1983), not least of which are the ownership patterns of the press, the openness of the communication system, the right of the press to communicate and the right of the audience to receive mediated messages.

### ***Theoretical Framework***

Ethics, or moral philosophy, is an acquired habit of the human intellect which enables its possessor to reason to true conclusions about the rightness or wrongness of human actions as a means for attaining true happiness (Bourke 1966: 4, 7). Ethical theories provide vantage points from which important ethical decisions can be considered (Lambeth 1986: 25). While philosophers in general agree that ethics and morals are synonymous and that both involve human action or *praxis* (Kant 1977; Bourke 1966; Garner and Rosen 1967; Mackie 1977), little agreement exists on the criteria for making those ethical decisions. However, the three dominant theoretical approaches to making ethical judgments are: (1) deontological ethics or formalism, that is, actions that are based on the good intentions of the doer and that satisfy some formal conditions, duties and choices, regardless of their consequences. ('Deon means 'what ought to be done.')

A deontologist believes in producing the greatest possible happiness for the greatest possible number regardless of the morality of the action. Thus something other than the consequences of an action determine what actions are morally right; (2) situational ethics, that is, desires of the human nature which compromise moral principles or set

them aside in a situation; and (3) result, consequential or utilitarian (teleological) ethics, that is, actions which bring about absolute results, or which satisfy and maximize the common good. Consequences (that is, the good that is produced) determine the morality of the action.

For the deontologist, certain things — virtue, pleasure, and knowledge — are intrinsically good. Promises, contracts, agreements, and one's relationship with those affected by one's action are the criteria that determine what one ought to do. But the deontologist does not believe that personal happiness or consequence of an action is important to ethical considerations. What is important is the 'categorical imperative,' which Immanuel Kant describes as the super-principle or general rule by which one evaluates the specific rules that govern one's actions.

In contrast, the situational ethicist applies the ethical principles (not the laws or rules) of his community and its heritage to every decision-making situation, thus aiming "at a contextual appropriateness — not the "good" or the "right" but the fitting" (Fletcher 1966: 26-28).

Situational ethics, as enunciated as early as the fifth century B.C. by the Greek philosopher, Protagoras, consists of three dimensions: (1) ethical judgments which are supported by different individuals or groups are often different and conflicting in a very fundamental way; (2) conflicting principles which sometimes are equally valid or correct; and (3) moral principles which people espouse and by which people ought to live, or try to live (Brandt 1961: 433).

In Mackie's (1977) contemporary, pervasive view on ethical relativism or situational ethics, he argues that there are no objective values as Plato, Kant, and Sidwick hold that there are, and that even though moral judgments are universalizable, they are subjective and do not impose any rational constraint on choices of actions or on defensible patterns or behaviour. He also observes that a moral system must have justified constraints on behaviour if any significant satisfactions are to be obtained by anyone. Consistent with these views is that suggested by Feldmann, Kelsay and Brown (1986) in regard to international businesses that need to apply the traditional processes of moral reasoning to evaluate their responsibilities to their numerous constituencies and to the latter's laws and customs. Such a process involves weighing the various options which are possible, choosing among them, and justifying one's choice.

In further contrast, Bourke (1966), Finnis (1983), and Garner and Rosen (1967) argue that ethics is absolute, and that the rightness or wrongness of an action can be predetermined. If an action were right, it did not matter if a friend or relative were injured. The act is always right. Bourke (1966: 13), for instance, says that ethics



should offer an opportunity for the study of the absolute difference between right and wrong in human conduct. It should aim at the establishing of definite norms, or rules, of behaviour of men. Without this, the basic ethical concepts of duty, of obligation, of moral responsibility, of a pattern of human action which is universally good for all men under all circumstances, lose their meaning.

Utilitarians, for example, argue that an act is right only if its consequences on everyone (the group or society) are the most desirable. While Jeremy Bentham, the founder of utilitarianism, describes this philosophy as the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number,' John Stuart Mill emphasizes the quality rather than the quantity of happiness (Boyce and Jensen 1978:36). Additionally, Garner and Rosen (1967), in subscribing to the normative theory of ethics, reject the notion of ethical relativism, that is, in each culture, the judgments made by the members of that culture are correct, and that freedom is a condition that enables one to exercise one's free will to determine which judgments are correct.

Therefore, what ethical theory emerges in newspaper editorials on national issues? If it were deontological, do Nigerian journalists adhere strictly to a fixed set of journalistic principles? If it were situational, what competing principles guide journalists in making situational decisions? Finally, if it were utilitarian, do journalists suggest that their actions and viewpoints are based on consequences that will result in the 'greatest happiness for the greatest number,' or simply in the greatest happiness?

In applying this theoretical framework to the analyses of the editorials, the following questions were asked: (1) Does an editorial contribute to the nation's greatest 'common good'? (utilitarian ethics); (2) is the ethics of an editorial usually determined by a fixed set of journalistic principles, moral obligation or duty, rather than by the perceived consequences of the editorial on interest groups? (deontological ethics); and (3) is the ethics of an editorial usually based on journalistic preferences that depart from a fixed set of moral or ethical principles, or that set such principles aside in a given situation? (situational ethics).

## **Methodology**

The exploratory research method was a qualitative thematic analysis of the editorial opinions of six Nigerian national newspapers: the *Daily Times*, which is semi-Federal Government-owned; the *New Nigerian*, which is Federal Government-owned; the *Daily Sketch*, which is owned by the Oyo State government; and the *Nigerian Tribune*, *The Guardian*, and the *National Concord*, which are all privately-owned. The selection of these newspapers permits analysis at two levels of newspaper ownership: government and private (or independent) ownerships. The goal was to

ascertain their ethical inclinations and then attempt to explain, within the context of our theoretical framework, the ethical responsibility of the newspapers.

Editorials have been defined as opinion columns that reflect a newspaper's views on an issue or event and which appear daily in approximately the same place on the editorial page or section (Windhauser 1973: 563). Oakes (1968: 2) describes the editorial page as a newspaper's 'heart and soul, the one area where the personality and, more important, the philosophy of the newspaper can most properly be expressed, where individuality can be given far freer rein than is permissible within the relatively rigid guidelines of news accounts....' Therefore, it is the logical place for the press's criticisms of the administration and for its opinions on national issues.

Five randomly constructed seven-day weeks (Jones and Carter 1959), excluding Sundays, were selected from 1988.<sup>1</sup> They yielded 35 unsigned editorials for each newspaper (Table 1), resulting in a total of 210 editorials.

*Table 1. Overall number of editorial analysed in each of six national newspapers, by month in 1988.*

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January	8
February	4
March	5
April	3
May	4
June	7
July	4
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Total	35

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Coding was done by the author, using the three ethical questions in the previous sections as indicia. A standard measure of reliability for content analysis (Krippendorff 1980) was used in conjunction with the recommended cut-off criterion of 0.70 for reporting results. A subset of the editorials was coded by three other coders in order to ascertain the reliability of the identified dominant ethical themes. The results were acceptable.



Because of the eclectic nature of ethical principles (Lambeth 1986) and of the 'co-existence of ethical accents' (Meiden 1980), it is inappropriate to consistently make rigid operational distinctions among all three theories. Thus, the 'dominant' theory represented in the editorials was used in the subsequent analyses of the editorial responsibility of the press. The subject matter (theme) in each editorial was identified. Themes that were repeated in at least three newspapers were used in the analysis. Using such an *a priori* cut-off criterion, 10 such themes were identified. In some instances, substantial segments of the editorials were quoted to illustrate the application of the ethical theories.

### *Thematic Analyses of Editorials*

The results presented in Table 2 show that all the newspapers in this study applied utilitarian ethics more frequently than they applied both deontological and situational ethics. Situational ethics had the least application, with two of the three privately-owned newspapers indicating its least presence. The *National Concord* (privately owned) had the least application of deontological and situational ethics, and the most frequent application of utilitarian ethics.

*Table 2. Percentages of dominant ethical inclinations of newspaper editorials, by newspaper ownership.*

	Government Newspapers			Private Newspapers		
	Daily Times	New Nigerian	Daily Sketch	The Guardian	Nigerian Tribune	National Concord
Dominant Ethical Inclination	(N = 31) (%)	(N = 30) (%)	(N = 24) (%)	(N = 30) (%)	(N = 29) (%)	(N = 32) (%)
Deontological	19	17	21	30	34	13
Situational	10	10	8 <sup>1</sup>	17	7	6 <sup>1</sup>
Utilitarian	71	73	71	53	59	81
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

<sup>1</sup> N's vary for three reasons: (1) All editorials on international issues and events were excluded from the analyses; (2) some newspapers (e.g., the *Daily Sketch* and the *Nigerian Tribune*) did not publish any editorials in some issues; and (3) some newspapers (e.g., *The Guardian*) occasionally published more than one editorial in an issue.

The *Nigerian Tribune* (privately owned) had the highest occurrence of deontological ethics ('what ought to be done'). Overall, a private newspaper indicated the most frequent and the least frequent application of deontological and utilitarian ethics, while a private newspaper (*The Guardian*) also had the most frequent application of situational ethics. These results were further explored by log-linear analysis (Hinkle, McLaughlin, and Austin 1988), a multivariate, cross-classification extension of the chi-square technique for categorical variables. While differences by newspapers were not statistically significant, differences in the application of the dominant type of ethical theory were significant at the 0.05 level. The application of situational ethics among all the newspapers was significantly lower than the application of deontological ethics, while the application of utilitarian ethics was significantly higher than the application of both deontological and situational ethics. The interaction between newspapers and dominant type of ethical inclination was not significant ( $p > 0.05$ ).

The thematic analyses that follow will first focus on the five editorial themes on which at least one newspaper indicated a difference in ethical inclination, followed by those on which all the newspapers had similar editorial inclinations (Table 3).

**Table 3. Themes in editorials published in three or more newspapers during sample period, by newspaper ownership.**

Editorial theme	Government Newspapers			Private Newspapers		
	Daily Times	New Nigerian	Daily Sketch	The Guardian	Nigerian Tribune	National Concord
Traditional rulers/councillors	$X^c$	$X^b$	$X^c$	$X^c X^b$	—	$X^c$
Free education	$X^c$	—	$X^c$	$X^a$	—	
Dangerous drugs	$X^a$	—	$X^c X^a$	—	$X^a$	—
Nigerian airways	$X^c$	$X^c$	$X^c$	$X^a$	—	$X^b$
Morality and Code of Conduct Bureau	$X^c$	$X^a X^a$	—	$X^c$	$X^a$	—
Petrochemical industry	$X^c$	$X^c$	$X^c$	—	$X^c$	—
1988 Federal budget	—	$X^c X^c$	$X^c X^c$	—	$X^c$	—
Toxic Waste at Koko	$X^c$	$X^c$	—	—	—	$X^c$
Books/Literacy	—	—	$X^c$	—	$X^c$	$X^c$
NITEL	—	$X^c$	—	$X^c$	$N$	$X^c$
Total	7	9	9	6	5	5

*a* Theme indicates the presence of deontological ethics.

*b* Theme indicates the presence of situational ethics.

*c* Theme indicates the presence of utilitarian ethics.



## 1. Traditional Rulers/Councillors

The *National Concord*, a private newspaper, used the utilitarian ethical perspective more often than any other newspaper, emphasizing a general concern for 'the nation's greatest common good.' For example, in an editorial titled 'On the role of local government secretaries' (January 16, p. 2), the *Concord* noted that even though the fundamental changes being made in the nation's civil service were 'laudable and innovative, certain ambiguities in the system are beginning to emerge.' It described as 'ludicrous' the expectation that local government funds being made directly available to the local councils could be managed properly by secretaries whose loyalties were to the state rather than to the councils. It called for 'local government autonomy.'

The *Daily Times*, a Federal Government newspaper, in an editorial on the same subject, reminded councillors of the 'do's and don'ts of responsible governance' (January 13, p. 10) [utilitarian ethics]. It urged the councillors 'to see service to the people as the essence of leadership and wished 'them luck in their onerous but enviable tasks.'

The *Daily Sketch* used such terms as 'team work' and 'absolute cooperation' to describe the requirements for the role of councillors in 'the developmental strategies that would be beneficial to the growth and development of their areas' (March 5, p. 2). Like the *Daily Times* editorial, the development theme had an overarching importance here.

In contrast, the *New Nigerian* (July 11, p. 1) in an editorial related to the role of government at the local level, used the situational approach to assess the role of traditional rulers:

Even with the constitutional backing the only guarantee of survival for traditional institutions is a conscious effort to steer them away from politics and other activities which can only render them more vulnerable to the wind of change. Traditional rulers are their own guarantors in this regard.

The *Guardian*, a private newspaper, published two editorials on the subject. One took a situational perspective similar to that of the *New Nigerian*, noting that for the new relationship between the government and the local councils to be effective, an 'adjustment in the share of responsibility and function' may be needed (June 15, p. 12). The other took a utilitarian approach (March 9, p. 8).

## 2. Free Education

The two government newspapers that ran editorials on free education used the utilitarian approach. The *Times* suggested that to lessen the burden of school fees, the standards of public education should be improved and made comparable to those in private schools (January 25, p. 14). The *Daily Sketch* suggested that education at the primary level should be free (June 6, p. 2). The *Guardian*, in applying the 'ought' principle, said: 'The *Guardian* has always held that free education is a right, not a privilege, and that we can indeed arrange our finances as to make free education possible in the here and now' (July 27, p. 10). It said that the 'utility and necessity for educating the children of the poor is [*sic*] entirely beyond debate.'

## *Dangerous Drugs*

On the subject of fake drugs being sold on the Nigerian market, the *Times* addressed some of the dangers of such drugs and suggested a 'strong enough penalty that can act as a deterrent to others ... [and] by punishing any offenders caught so severely, that others will learn a lesson' (February 11, p. 10) [deontological ethics].

The *Sketch* had two editorials on the subject. One, titled 'We Are Being Poisoned' (April 14, p. 2), asked: 'How do these dangerous items enter the country? Do the people we have hired to inspect our imports test consumables coming to the country? If this is outside their brief, should it not be a part of it?' It concluded: 'We are supposed to have a guardian angel, the Food and Drug Administration, testing all foods and drugs entering the country. Its do-nothingness matches its obscurity.' In comparison, while the *Times* suggested harsh measures against specific interest groups (the traffickers of fake drugs), the *Sketch* took a low-key approach, raising questions of national interest (utilitarian ethics). In a second editorial on the same subject, the *Sketch* expressed satisfaction with the steps taken by the Federal Government to stem the tide of the distribution of fake drugs in the country. It, however, called for the prosecution of those who help pharmaceutical companies to flood the market with substandard drugs; it also called for the closure of such companies (deontological ethics).

The *Tribune* was the only private newspaper that ran an editorial on substandard, dangerous drugs. Like the *Sketch*, it, too, applied the deontological perspective: 'Laws stipulating stiff penalties should be enacted to deal conclusively with the smuggling of fake drugs' (June 6, p. 7). In essence, such interest groups as Medipex Pharmaceutical Limited in England and Freedom Pharmacy in Sokoto that were blacklisted for manufacturing substandard drugs were clear targets of the editorials that applied the deontological perspective.

### *3. Nigerian Airways*

Five newspapers commented on the fate of Nigeria Airways, a government corporation. All the three government newspapers suggested measures that would make the airline profitable and efficient, thus making it of better service to the nation [utilitarian ethics]. The *Times* suggested 'privatization' (June 9, p. 14). The *New Nigerian* did 'not think that factors militating against profitability are insurmountable since examples of other airlines have proved that the sector is a lucrative one' (April 14, p. 1). And the *Sketch* suggested that the country 'must provide all the necessary facilities that make for safe flying' (June 3, p. 2).

The private newspapers indicated the presence of deontological ethics (*The Guardian*) and situational ethics (*National Concord*). *The Guardian*, in a related editorial titled 'Hajj blues for airways staff,' said that the arrest of



airways staff by the governor of Kano state because of the delay in transporting pilgrims to Saudi Arabia was 'wrong and inexcusable' (July 11, p. 10). It observed that the governor, Group Captain Umaru, may 'unwittingly have created the impression that it is permissible to delay certain kinds of flights and impermissible, even criminal, to delay hajj flights.' While the governor applied situational ethics, *The Guardian* noted that 'ideally, no flight should be delayed' [deontological ethics].

The *National Concord* noted that the difficulties the airline faces are so excruciating that the government should 'lend a helping hand' (June 3, p. 2) (situational ethics).

### ***Code of Conduct Bureau***

Two government and two private newspapers each ran editorials on morality in the Nigerian society. The *Times* believed that while the newly established Code of Conduct Bureau deserved 'to be hailed', what the country needed in addition was a total re-orientation of the people (June 3, p. 10) (utilitarian ethics). The *New Nigerian* had two editorials on morality. The first titled 'Media and Morality' pointed to the need 'to address the issue of media influence on morality' (February 2, p. 1). In strict deontological terms, it stated:

We advise therefore that the mass communication policy should go beyond setting the modality of ownership and stipulate a level of decency beyond which mass media must not fall. Certainly, it should ban a sheepish imitation of foreign media that display the 'Page Three' girl to titillate their audience. We cannot afford its corrupting influence here. There is a need for a censor's unit in the NTA [Nigerian Television Authority] which should perform the function of making sure programmes measure up to the level of decency so established. This should be extended to the films shown in the cinema houses too.

The second, titled 'Public Morality,' was on the inauguration of the Code of Conduct Bureau (June 15, p. 1): 'To succeed, CCB [Code of Conduct Bureau] should be empowered to ensure compliance with the rules [of public accountability and probity]; it should be autonomous, if not independent; must make public all declarations and extend its activities to the public sector.'

The *Guardian*, a private newspaper, specified criteria that could contribute to the success of the bureau and suggested methods that would help improve the moral character of the nation (June 24, p. 12) (utilitarian ethics). The *Nigerian Tribune*, another private newspaper, called for a constitutional amendment that will give the public access to the 'declarations of public officers.' It said: 'In fact, it is high time Nigerians adopted the philosophy of leadership by example and, like Caesar's wife, be above board' (June 15, p. 7) (Deontological ethics).

## 5. Petrochemical Industry

There was also some editorial interest in the commissioning of two petrochemical plants at Ekpan and Kaduna. However, all four editorials on the subject indicated the application of utilitarian ethics and were effusive in noting the long-range benefits of the plants. The relevance of such an industry to a developing country was demonstrated 'through a cursory look at the myriad end-uses to which the products could be put' (*Daily Sketch*, June 1, p. 2). The *Times* thus described the first phase of the project as 'a thing to be happy about' (March 21, p. 14). The *New Nigerian* editorial described the plants as 'a major leap forward in Nigeria's stride towards an effective take-off and the laying of sound basis for genuine economic self-reliance' (March 21, p. 1). It concluded that 'the nation should look forward to a buoyant petrochemical sector that will ease the unhealthy over-dependence on imports.'

Finally, the *Tribune*, the only private newspaper that ran an editorial on the subject, described the petrochemical project as 'a concrete contribution to local sourcing of raw materials. It has opened up a new phase in the industrialization process of the country' (March 25, p. 7).

## 6. 1988 Federal Budget

Two government and one private newspaper commented on the federal government budget, suggesting optimism about its potential for success. The *Daily Sketch* said that it represented 'some relief to the people and should not be taken as the final solution to our problems' (January 14, p. 2). The *New Nigerian* said that the budget 'exceeded the expectations of even the best optimists of the country' (January 13, p. 3). The *Nigerian Tribune* described it as a 'good budget, no doubt' (January 14, p. 9).

All the sample newspapers applied utilitarian ethics to the dumping of toxic waste in Koko by an Italian freighter, to the scarcity of text books in the country and its effect on literacy, and to the problems of the Nigerian Telecommunications Limited (NITEL). On the Koko waste, the *Daily Times*, for example, advised citizens to be alert in avoiding what may lead to deaths of Nigerians (June 16, p. 10). The *New Nigerian* called for thorough investigations into the dumping in order to 'ascertain the magnitude of the problem to the community' and to identify ways to help them (June 16, p. 1). Finally, the *Concord* said that the government could not afford to drag its feet on the matter (June 9, p. 2).

The benefits of the government's review of its plans on books and printing machines and papers far outstripped the revenue from duties on them, the *Daily Sketch* (January 19, p. 2) observed. In a similar vein, the



*Tribune* called for 'far-sighted education administration policies' (January 27, p. 9), while the *Concord* called for a 'framework for a comprehensive book policy' (January 23, p. 2). Overall, the newspapers were concerned about the long-range effects of the unavailability of major textbooks in Nigeria.

The *New Nigerian*, *The Guardian*, and the *Concord* all observed the improvements ['a breath of fresh air,' as the *New Nigerian* (January 25, p. 1) put it] that have taken place in the Nigerian Telecommunications Limited. They also suggested some changes that would help improve the services of the organization.

Each of the government newspapers had more coverage of themes published in at least three newspapers during the sampling period than each of the private newspapers. It is plausible that the development concept of the news was more strictly adhered to by the government newspapers than by the private newspapers.

### ***Responsibility and Ethics***

At the beginning of this paper, 'role-responsibility' (Hart 1968) was identified as the framework within which the analysis of the sample newspapers within our ethical framework will be made. Table 2 indicates a more significant presence of utilitarian ethics than either deontological or situational ethics in the Nigerian press. This pattern is also reflected in Table 3, which shows that 30 editorial items out of a total of 41 used the utilitarian perspective. The presence of deontological ethics was second highest; situational ethics was the least emphasized.

These ethical patterns are consistent with earlier research that sought to identify the presence of developmental news in the Third World mass media. Perhaps because the media in the developing Third World are generally 'assigned' the developmental role (Martin and Chaudhary 1983), this implies sensitivity and responsiveness of such media to the developmental efforts of the administrations. In regard to such efforts, the overarching interest has been in expressing editorial opinions that contribute to the overall 'good' of the country. Such level of editorial interest is consistent with news-story interest in the Third World. One analysis of the content of nine private newspapers and government-owned newspapers in the Third World (including five in sub-Saharan Africa) showed, for example, that when newspapers examined the relevance of development problems and projects to national or local levels (utilitarian ethics), the government-controlled newspapers did so more often than privately owned newspapers (Ogan, Fair, and Shah 1984). In that same analysis, when comparison of the outcome of development projects was made with the original goals, it was done more often in the government-

controlled newspapers than in the privately owned newspapers — by more than a three-to-one margin.

Fair's (1986) study of government-owned newspapers in Nigeria and the Ivory Coast makes clear the effects of patron-client relationship between journalists and the ruling elite. Partly because the media infrastructure is limited in its own development and partly because the government is the media's largest 'beat,' journalistic reliance on the government constrains any tendency toward the critical presentation and evaluation of news issues and events.

Further, as Sobowale's (1986) study of the influence of ownership on the coverage of national issues in the Nigerian press indicates, events less favourable to the image of the government were more likely to be ignored by government-owned newspapers than by privately owned newspapers. Also government-owned newspapers published more favourable stories about governmental issues than private newspapers.

In applying utilitarian ethics, that is, in contributing to the good of the nation, the newspapers tended to be more supportive of government programmes. On the other hand, in charting an independent course of reasoning — 'what ought to be done' — the newspapers do so less significantly than their application of the utilitarian perspective (Table 2).

The pattern of deontological and situational ethics particularly among the private newspapers deserves some comment. Two private newspapers reminded the government what it 'ought to do' more often than all the three government newspapers. On the other hand, two private newspapers were the least likely to apply situational ethics. This means that while two private newspapers more often had the inclination to be more critical of the authorities than the government newspapers, two private newspapers also were the least willing to compromise their ethical standards.

### *Summary and Conclusion*

This exploratory study describes the patterns of press ethics as indicated in the editorial columns of six Nigerian national newspapers. It examines the 'role-responsibility' of the press within the context of the 'dominant' ethical themes identified in editorials. A qualitative thematic analysis of the editorials indicate that the Nigerian daily press have a preference for applying utilitarian ethics to national issues. Situational ethics has the least presence in the editorials. The analyses also indicate that the government-owned newspapers are more likely than the private newspapers to use a utilitarian perspective in expressing their opinions on, and in criticizing, government actions. These analyses also show that government interests are well-served by the editorials of the government-owned press; the private newspapers, nonetheless, provide the much-needed balance in a



media system whose relationships with the government are occasionally confrontational. But is the current emphasis on editorial ethics that emphasizes the 'greatest good' consistent with the goals of 'development news,' which de-emphasizes critical and prescriptive approaches on what the government does or might do? Is such editorial ethics in a society's best interest? Hachten (1985) asserts that the African media have contributed little to development efforts and that 'one is hard pressed to name a single government or party-controlled newspaper anywhere in Africa that is really much good or that has been very effective in aiding development efforts.'

Studies by Ogan and Swift (1982), Ogan, Fair and Shah (1984), and by Shah (1988) assessed the quality of development news and found it to be poor. Such news also did not reflect a thorough, investigative-style reporting as specified by Aggarwala (1979).

By beginning to understand the different manifestations of the government-press relationships and of the media role in contributing the nation's 'common good,' journalists can better plan for more effectively involving the press in the complex and difficult process of national development. The ethics of the journalist's expressed opinions and actions is one dimension that influences the feasibility of that goal.

## Note

1. Using a table of random numbers, the following dates during the first seven months in 1988 were selected: January 13, 14, 16, 19, 23, 25, 27, 30; February 2, 6, 8, 11; March 5, 9, 21, 25, 28; April 12, 14, 25; May 2, 10, 14, 23; June 1, 3, 6, 9, 15, 16, 24; and July 2, 6, 11, and 27.

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